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ABSTRACT

What parents view as being important for their children to learn and how they believe their children are able to learn are reflected not only in the learning opportunities provided in the home but also in the teaching strategies parents use with their children in every day parent/child interactions. An investigation of the language transactions between parents and their children during a variety of writing activities has produced evidence of how the language of the parents indicates their own model of written language and how their teaching language influences children's writing behaviors, their written productions, and their belief in themselves as writers. Excerpts from parent-child dialogues along with some samples of the children's writing are provided as viable indications of these interrelationships. These dialogue excerpts and writing samples indicate that when parent/adult expectations focus on the child as a competent informant of what he or she knows; when attention is centered on the meaning intent of the child's written message rather than on correctly formed letters and accurately spelled words; and when process is viewed as more important than product, then the naturally developing literacy growth of the child is enabled. (BB)

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THE LANGUAGE OF TEACHING: MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN CHILDREN'S DEVELOPING LITERACY

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THE LANGUAGE OF TEACHING: MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN CHILDREN'S DEVELOPING LITERACY

There are few who would challenge the position that learning for the child has roots in the home environment. Over twenty years ago, Ira Gordon began to demonstrate that what parents view as being important for their children to learn and how they believe their children are able to learn are reflected not only in the learning opportunities provided in the home but also in the teaching strategies they use with their children in every day parent/child interactions. In this educational agenda, there is an exchange of meanings between parent and child--a meaning exchange founded in language which describes, explains, elaborates, predicts, confirms, accepts and supports; or, contradicts, corrects, pressures, rejects, and sometimes, even ignores. In other words, what is said and how it is said, what is heard and how it is interpreted, and therefore, what response is given are all in the teaching-learning language transactions of parents and children.

With the best of parent intentions, these teaching strategies have positive or negative effects on children's learning. Why? Because the parents' language carries messages of expectations for what and how their children should learn; and children respond to those messages. The

language of teaching either enables children to feel competent and be risk-takers in learning, or it limits children's belief in their abilities and causes them to rely on what others do and how they do it. The characteristics of this teaching language can be seen in the following descriptions:

Questioning, Stating and Responding Language

Parent-initiated Questions

Interrogation questions: those that expect a "right answer" or "one-word" response

Request questions: those that enable clarification or additional information

Invitation questions: those that encourage prediction or elaboration

Parent-initiated Statements

Insistance comments: those that "nag" or demand or become repetitive directions

Directive comments: those that tell specifically what or how to do

Informative comments: those that provide explanation, clarification or relevant cues

Supportive comments: those that relate known experiences for increased understanding and decision-making

Invitation comments: those that encourage elaboration, prediction and self-direction

Parent Responses to Child's Language or Efforts

Ignores

Corrects or rejects interpretations or predictions

Takes control of child's efforts

Provides additional cues or information

Promotes further elaboration or prediction

Confirms predictions, interpretations and/or efforts

Values child's questions/comments

Offers meaningful praise

The Influence of Teaching Language on Developing Literacy

We know from compelling research related to children's developing literacy that learning to write is as primary a language learning process as learning to talk--when the environment enables that process. Therefore, studying the language transactions between parents and their children during a variety of writing activities--part of the home learning environment--has produced evidence of how the language of the parents indicate their own model of written language and how their teaching language influences children's writing behaviors, their written productions, and thier belief in themselves as writers. (See notes and references). The following excerpts from parent-child dialogues along with some samples of the children's writing will provide the reader with viable indications of these interrelationships.

It's important to begin with the parent's perceptions of when a child begins to write. At nineteen months, Brad pulled some paper off the dining room table, along with a pencil and a pen. Sitting down on the floor, he picked up the pencil, made child-like scribbles, and said, "Brad draw." Then, he picked up the pen, made similar scribbles, and said, "Brad write." His mother's response was, "Yes, you did! You drew and you wrote. That's great!" Heard in that parent's language response was confirmation of and support for her young son's intentions--an important enabling teaching behavior.

At twenty-eight months, Bethany was a prolific writer. Each time she wrote, her parents invited her to read what she had written. These invitations to read indicated the parents' belief in the child's writing and gave her confidence in her own writing competence. Bethany read the first message as "Happy Birthday to Daddy;" and "A 2 LMO WRS--Mom" as she "underlined" each of the phrases read. When asked to read the second message, however, she responded with, "It's for Stevie; she'll be able to read it." Confidence? Yes! But only the child knew what she had written!

(Insert Figures 1 and 2)

Figure 1

Figure 2

Bethany 2:4 10

A suggestion or an appropriate cue at the right time can make a child's efforts the success desired. Two examples show how parents enabled their youngsters to maintain ownership of their own writing. In the first writing (Figure 3), Audrey wrote A-u-d-e for her name. She looked at the letters, seeming to wonder what was in error. Her mother provided a suggestion: "You might spell it outloud." When she did just that, Audrey inserted and "r" and added the "y". Self-editing for the child was possible with an understanding comment from the parent.

(Insert Figure 3)

Dick's father also provided a helpful cue for his son as the child wanted to write about being videotaped while reading Edelman's book, Boom-de-Boom. "Remember who was the main person in the book?" the father asked. The younster replied: "The fat lady who loved to dance." The father then suggested: "Why don't you get on the first page and see if you can find out how to write about the fat lady." This is Dick's message; and, as he read it back, his father put his arm around him and said: "Very good!"

(Insert Figure 4)

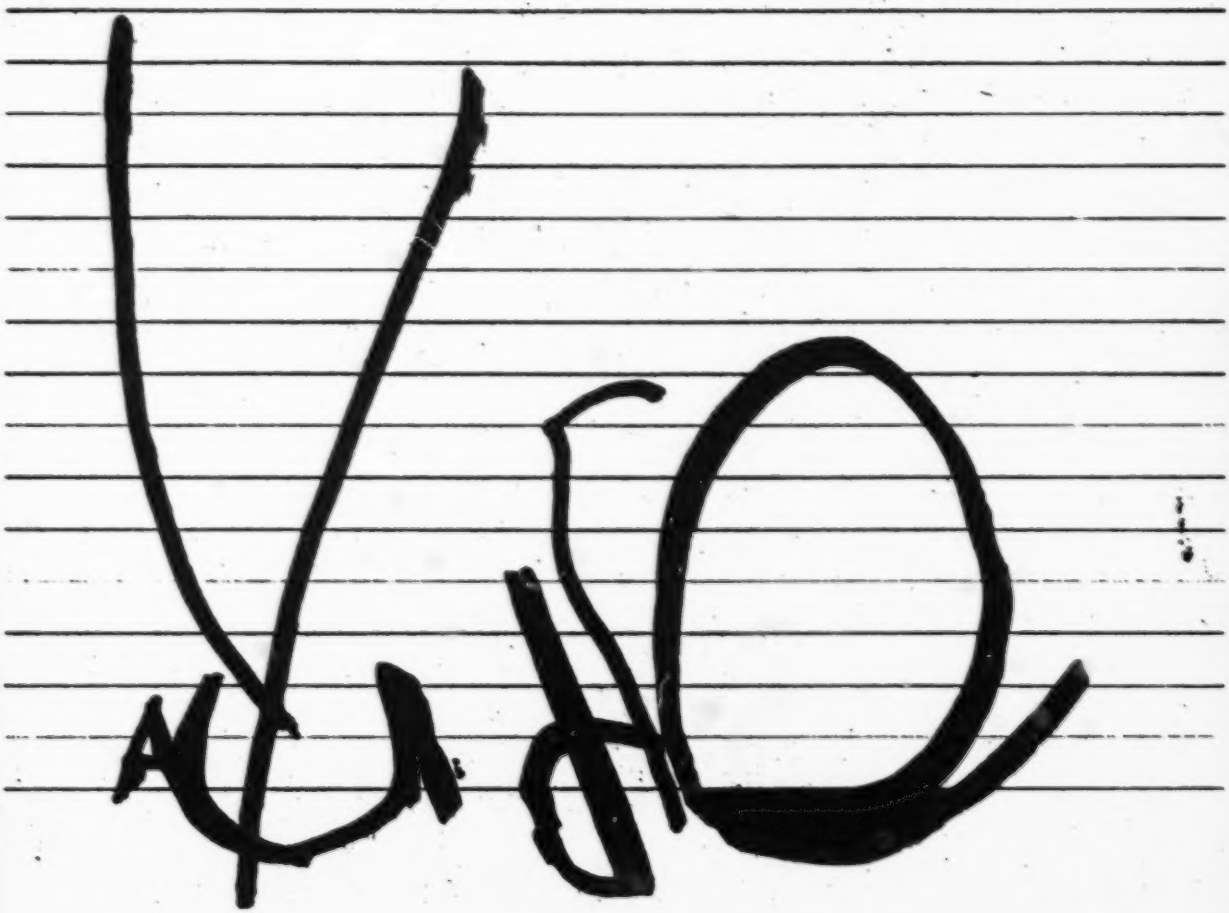


Figure 3

(McCully, 1982, p. 260)

Figure 4

The next writing sample came from a child whose mother asked if she would make a list of the things they needed to take on a lake picnic. It was obviously a sincere request as it was followed by this information: "It will help me remember what to pack." When the youngster was finished, she handed her list to the mother who validated her expectations by reading her daughter's list. The child's response was, "The pictures help."

(Insert Figure 5)

Each of these parents served in supportive, enabling roles. Their language invited, suggested, sincerely requested, encouraged, accepted and validated the children's intentions to make personal meaning with print. Furthermore, the language of the parents indicated strong beliefs in each child's competence as a beginning writer as well as demonstrated that meaning is more important than the surface features and structure of the written language.

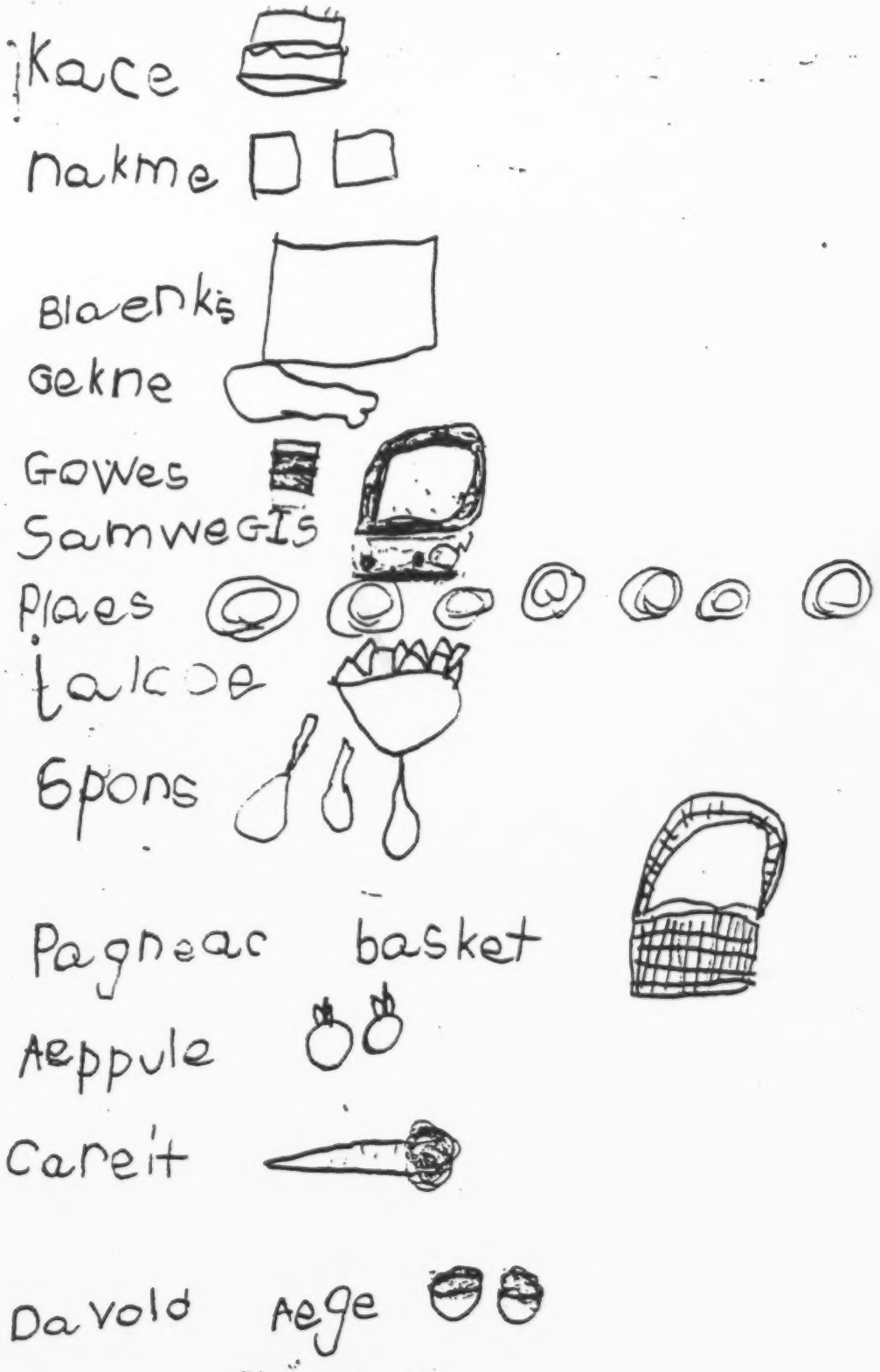
Now, let's look at a typrescript of the dialogue between another parent and her daughter as the child tried to end her letter her own way.

Parent: Sign your name. Done.

Child: No, wait.

Parent: Sign your name.

Child: I can sign my name in cursive.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Aege

Figure 5

Parent: No, you're not writing your name in cursive.

Child: Oh, I'll mess it up?

Parent: That's right. Write--print your name, not cursive your name.

Child: But, I can write it in cursive.

Parent: I don't want you to write your name in cursive.

Child: OK. I'll make it over, I guess.

The mother's rejection of the child's belief in her own knowledge and the insistence of the mother to do it "her way" took control completely away from the child's efforts to use the knowledge she knew she had.

One final typescript of a dialogue between another parent and her child, along with the child's written production, will demonstrate the power of the adult-child language transactions during a written language event.

(Insert Figure 6)

Kristy: That says, "turtle."

Mother: No, that says, "Kristy."

Kristy: But, but--

Mother: Doesn't that say, "Kristy?"

Kristy: Well, I write another one.

Mother: You did? Where?

Figure 6

(Searcy, 1984, p. 248)

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Kristy: Make a K.

Mother: Make a t. What are you writing? Kristy? Good S! Good S. Oh, good job. That's it. Not very many squiggles.

Kristy: That's my name.

Mother: Ok, what's this letter?

Kristy: That's a R. That's a R.

Mother: Then, what's that letter? Is that a bung-up?

Kristy: Yes.

Mother: Just scratch it out.

Kristy: No, but this says, this says, "Just lines." This says, "Just lines."

Mother: That's just lines. Well, honey, if you put lines in the middle of the word, it doesn't make sense. You can't have lines in your name. See?

Kristy: But that says lines right here.

Mother: Ok, why don't you put that up above your name, not in your name. See, that doesn't say your name now.

Again, the parent's language was directing, rejecting, correcting and nonsupportive of her daughter's writing and the intent of her message. One may wonder about "carry-over" influence when, in writing at another time, Kristy's response to a question, "What does that say?" was: "It doesn't read. It doesn't read!"

Summary and Implications

Our research supports the notion that the language of teaching adults reflects their expectations for what children know or should know about writing--and as a direct result of the adult's model of written language. We can substantiate that when the adult's expectations focus on the child as a competent informant of what he or she knows; when attention is centered on the meaning intent of the child's written message rather than on correctly formed letters and accurately spelled words; when process is viewed as more important than product, then the naturally developing literacy growth of the child is enabled. In other words, children's belief about self as a writer is influenced significantly by the expectations for learning that are heard and interpreted by the child in response to the adult's oral language of teaching.

This position suggests important considerations for teachers. First, we must recognize that our questions, comments and responses to children influence what they believe about themselves as learners. Secondly, when we accept the research findings of those who have so clearly demonstrated that children are writers long before formal instruction begins--that learning to write is a developmental process as natural as learning to use oral language--then that belief must be heard in the language we use to

enable this process. And, lastly, we must share this knowledge with parents whose home teaching strategies--and the language embedded within their teaching--may well determine the learning-to-write strategies that children bring into our classrooms.

Notes and References

The position presented in this manuscript reflects findings from the research of the author and made possible, in part, through funding by the Graduate Research Council, University of Missouri-Columbia. Additionally, two of the examples (Figure 3 and Figure 6 with its accompanying typescript excerpt) are found in the dissertations of McCully and Searcy, respectively. For further documentation of these research efforts, the following references are provided for interested readers.

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